

HOW TO KNOW GOD'S WILL

Among all the controversial and confusing subjects in the religious world today, we can find the topic under consideration now—How to Know God's Will. By "God's Will" I refer to "What God desires of us as revealed in the Bible." God probably has desires for each of us as individuals, but these aren't revealed to us in some written form and are dealt with on a different level than what this study is about. There are at least three conditional attitudes for determining what God's Will is for our lives.

We should have an attitude of denial—denial of self's will.

This thought was presented by Paul in Romans 12:1: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service." The word "present" was commonly used to refer to the act where the owner of the sacrificial victim gave it up to the priest for use in the Jewish worship service. Now, in the Christian era, Paul urged every Christian, as a priest (First Peter 2:9 & Revelation 1:6), to offer his entire person, including his body and mind, to God for the purpose of service. Once offered, God accepts, and from then on the person is obligated to perform whatever service is required by God. The person offering himself to God becomes "holy" in the sense that, from then on, he's set apart for service, and this service is described as a "rational" one. So this offering of oneself to God is a rational and deliberate act of presentation. The same thought is mentioned in Paul's phrase "doing the Will of God from the heart" (Ephesians 6:6).

The verb "present" in Romans 12:1 is in the aorist tense, suggesting that there's only one enlistment, and that it's a once-for-all action, a life-long commitment to serve God. The illustration of the soldier was used by Paul in Second Timothy 2:4 where he mentioned that the good soldier avoids undue entanglements in civilian affairs in order that "he may please Him who enlisted him as a soldier."

The point illustrates one aspect of what a Christian does when he presents himself for service to God: he makes a decision to put God's Will first in his life. Other matters, such as civilian affairs, must be secondary: if one's duty as a soldier conflicts with civilian activity, then one's duty comes first; this was the point Jesus made in His comment on the disciple who keeps looking back, that is, who is distracted by other things, when He said, "'No one, having put his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God'" (Luke 9:62).

Paul reminded us that the life of a soldier involves suffering some hardships: "You, therefore, must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ" (Second Timothy 2:3). This means that sometimes, in order to carry out the Will of the Lord, we'll have to give up something we want and perhaps tolerate something we don't want, which brings up the concept of self-denial.

This term was used by Jesus where He referred to it as the first condition for discipleship: "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself..." (Matthew 16:24). By the concept of "discipleship" the Lord didn't mean salvation, He meant service. The idea of denying oneself is to quit putting one's own way first: when what a person wants conflicts with what God wants, that person denies himself, choosing what God wants for him. In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus said to the Father, "'Not what I want, but what You want'" (Mark 14:36).

To give up something we want involves a hardship: the soldier, when he enlists, gives up a number of things he would enjoy in civilian life in order to serve his chief. He may have to endure physical discomfort and emotional frustration at times, but he may also enjoy many things while he's serving. In another place Jesus was approached by a scribe who said, "I will follow You wherever You go" (Matthew 8:19); in essence he was saying, "I'm presenting myself to You for service." But when Jesus answered him He reminded him that service involves hardships, cautioning and urging him to count the cost of such a decision and the resulting duty by saying, "'Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head'" (verse 20). That way if he made such a decision he would be less likely to falter and disobey orders as a result of lack of determination.

Why does a Christian have to present himself to God for service before he can be successful in knowing

the Will of God for his life? I think it's obvious that it's useless for God to issue orders to a person until that person has made a decision to carry out His orders, otherwise he would have no desire to carry them out. A civilian doesn't think of himself as being obligated to obey orders issued for soldiers.

So how can a Christian know what God wants him to do in all cases when he has never been interested in following God's directions? In other words, since he has never told God he will obey Him, why should God bother to give directions? I don't mean to necessarily imply that God never directs people who haven't presented themselves for service, for He does. However, God cannot get through to these undedicated people as successfully as He can to those who have presented themselves for service and who are truly interested in living a life of obedience.

So until one has resolved that he's going to unceasingly allow God's desires for him to be foremost in his life, there's no need for him to pursue the next attitude.

We should have an attitude of desire—desire to know God's will.

A sincere desire to know God's Will comes as a result of the lifetime decision to present oneself for service and to obey God. We who have presented ourselves to God for service need to know His Will daily for the rest of our lives. Where does God want me to go, if anywhere? What does He want me to do while there? What should I do and not do? All such questions become quite important.

The condition of wanting to know is stated by Jesus in John 7:17: "If anyone wants to do His Will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority." The context of this verse is a visit Jesus made to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles (verse 2), and midway during the feast Jesus began teaching (verse 14), which produced a reaction and a question. The Jews marveled at His ability to teach and debate and use the Scriptures (verse 15); they asked the question, "How does this Man know letters, having never studied?" Jesus answered this question by saying that He was schooled in the seminary of God the Father, the One who sent Him (verse 16); so He claimed that what He taught was truth and had its very origin with Yahweh Himself. Then Jesus anticipated and answered their next question: "How can we know that Your teaching is from God the Father?" This is very close to the question a Christian must ask and answer every day: "How do I know whether this decision stems from God or from my own mind?" Jesus gave them two ways to know. The second way He mentioned when He pointed out that His ministry glorified God rather than Himself (verse 18); so the question is, "Whom does our decision glorify?" The first way He gave is what I want to consider: "If anyone wants to do His Will, he shall know" (verse 17); in other words, if one really wants to know and do God's Will, the truth, then God will see to it that he learns it. In another place Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled" (Matthew 5:6).

If one uses the light that God has given him, then God will honor that obedience by giving him more light, by revealing to him more of His Will: Jesus once said, "Take heed to what you hear. With the same measure you use, it will be measured to you; and to you who hear, more will be given. For whoever has, to him more will be given..." (Mark 4:24-25). Cornelius, a godly Gentile, was a man who lived up to the light he had: he feared God and was a righteous man (Acts 10:22). Peter, after his experience at the house of Cornelius, said that anyone who fears God and practices righteousness is acceptable to God (Acts 10:35). Because Cornelius had used the light he had, God sent him more light, in this case the truth about salvation in Christ, to which he was also obedient and thereby saved (verses 44 & 47).

So an essential component toward an understanding of God's Will for one's life is a desire to know it. Next...

We should have an attitude of deference—deference to God's will. {Deference means to courteously yield to the wishes or will of another.}

As soldiers for Jesus, we want to obey our Commander in chief; however, we also have the flesh which still longs to do what it wants to do, and what flesh wants to do and what God wants the Christian to do sometimes clash: Paul once said, "The flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh;

and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish" (Galatians 5:17). A good example of this conflict is the reluctant disciple who, in response to Christ's command to follow Him (Luke 9:59), replied, "Let me first go and bury my father." To bury one's father was a sacred duty to the Jew: on the human level this man had a strong desire to continue living at home until the time of his father's death, to bury him, and then to take up his duties in service to Jesus; however, Jesus was calling him into active duty right then. This threw the man into great conflict: he should put Christ first and not himself. Notice how the phrase "me first" is used twice in Luke 9:59 and 61: "Let me first go and bury my father.... Let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house."

The choice people make depends on their willingness to obey Christ on a daily basis, just like the choice this man made depended on the strength of his willingness on that day to obey Christ. This matter of day-by-day conflict and choice is referred to by Jesus as "taking up one's cross" (Matthew 16:24). The cross to the disciples was following the demands of Jesus such as preaching, which would bring inconvenience and suffering. To us today, the cross refers to any demand of God which would be unpleasant or bring trouble or suffering.

Perhaps every day there's something we think of which we should do, but because it may bring some unpleasantness, we shy away from it. In Luke, the word "daily" is part of Christ's command; so He was emphasizing that the matter of making choices and taking up one's cross occurs from day to day: "If anyone desire to come after Me, let him deny himself and take his cross daily and follow Me" (Luke 9:23). The Bible states an important principle about our daily practice: part of us wants to carry out our own will, and part of us wants to obey God's Will. The thing is, whichever part we keep on giving in to day after day, it's to this part that we become a slave: Peter said, "by whom a person is overcome, by him also he is brought into bondage" (Second Peter 2:19). By giving in to our sinful desires repeatedly over a long period of time, we develop a habit of doing this. As a result of forming such a habit, one reaches a condition where it's extremely difficult to deny oneself something that is wanted; instead of being a willing slave of God, an obedient soldier, such a person is a slave of his own desires. However, before we were Christians, this was the state of all of us: it was our way, our habitual practice, to do our own will: Paul said that "we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of the flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind" (Ephesians 2:3). This habit of ours didn't change immediately at salvation, but it did become possible for it to change.

As a result of Christ's death, the enslaving power of sin was abolished, making it possible for one to choose to obey the law of righteousness: Paul once wrote that "our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin" (Romans 6:6-7). Then it's up to the new man to consciously decide to stop repeatedly giving in to his habit of sinning and instead to present himself to God for service (Romans 6:12-14 & 22). He presents himself for service only once, then he struggles daily in conflict, perhaps being pulled in two directions; however, if one wants to do God's Will, he can, and the more he does it, the easier it becomes!

There's a common problem among Christians, though, namely an unwillingness to admit that a particular area of one's life isn't as it ought to be. He may be aware of the Bible instruction which refers to this area of his life, but he has never done anything about it; he wants to hang on to that sin for whatever reason. He may readily obey biblical commands regarding all other areas of his life, yet be very resistant to changing in this one area. This concept reminds me of the story of Beauty and the Beast, Beauty representing God's Word and the Beast's castle representing our lives: remember how Belle was allowed to go to any area of the castle...except one, and into this one area Belle was not welcome to go; yet, on the contrary, Paul wrote about our "castles" or lives, saying, "Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly (abundantly)" (Colossians 3:16). The idea of the verb "dwell" is "to be at home," and it was used to refer to the place where a person made his permanent home and had free run of the house. A person might stay temporarily at many places, but only when he arrives at his permanent residence does he say he is truly "at home." So Paul was urging Christians to let God's Word "be at home" in us "abundantly," meaning to accept the Word as the authoritative standard to which we're to conform our lives and apply that standard to every area of our lives; in other words, we should allow the guest to have free access to every room in our "castles" or our lives as a permanent resident.

This principle of willingness to accept God's Will and the authority of His Word is given by Jesus as the third condition for being a disciple: "'Follow (keep on following) Me'" (Matthew 16:24). He means for us to follow Him in obedience to His example and Word, to walk the road of obedience. Christ didn't pretend that such a road is wide and easy (Matthew 7:14), rather it's narrow, hedged in by many dos and don'ts; but, staying on that road makes effective service to God and eternal life possible.

So let's don't lock up any rooms in our lives. Let's don't try to keep God out of any part of our lives. Rather, let's apply the standard of God's Word to every part of our everyday practices.

Conclusion

There are many conditional attitudes to knowing God's Will for our daily lives: three of them are denying self's will, desiring to know God's Will, and deferring to His Will in every part of our lives on a daily basis.

There are probably many other conditions, but these are sufficient to place us on the right road to getting ourselves ready for God to reveal His Will to us, whether through His written Word or through His providence. Just remember, it's all in our daily attitudes!

[Tony E. Denton, November 1990. ASiteForTheLord.com]